

How “Special” Is Special Education?

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As special education teachers, we often find our mailboxes are stuffed with reports on new programs designed to fix, help, or cure any number of disabilities. Bound by legal mandates, we develop Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) based on children’s weaknesses. Trained to focus on skills and deficits, we worry about how to “drill and practice” or “monitor and adjust.”

Although our intentions may be good, when we follow this approach we miss out on seeing the whole child. As one elementary school principal pointed out, special education often finds out what a student cannot do and then gives the student the same kinds of activities, just more slowly. However, we have found that a better way of facilitating a child’s growth is to focus on his or her strengths and interests, using an active learning approach.

Does this mean we ignore IEP goals and objectives? NO!! We are bound by federal, state, and district regulations, and we follow them. But we also recognize that **all children acquire knowledge through active learning**, whether they are developing typically or nontypically. Children, with or without disabilities, con-

struct their own knowledge by interacting with people, materials, ideas, and events.

Disability “Labels”: How Much Do They Matter?

Consider these observations we noted about Chen, a 4-year-old in our classroom:

Chen enjoys playing with Matt, Cody, and Lisa. He likes to play on the computer. His favorite toy cars are the police and ambulance vehicles. He loves the book Crocodile Beat. He enjoys pretending to cook in the house area.

Chen avoids large groups. He tolerates messy activities and he doesn’t like to sit longer than 5 minutes. Chen knows many letters of the alphabet and can count accurately to 10. He recognizes the written names and symbols of other children in the class. He is beginning to problem-solve and acknowledge the feelings of other children.

This information about Chen helps us think of ideas we can use to support his development during plan-do-review, large- and small-group times, and other parts of the High/Scope daily routine. For example, during planning time we could use the police car to



Whether or not children are developing typically, we can support them most effectively by focusing on what they can do rather than deficits or problems.

“drive” to a particular area of the classroom where Chen might want to choose materials. Or, we could begin large-group time with the *Crocodile Beat* book.

Incidentally, we forgot to mention that Chen has autism. *But does knowing this fact change how we support Chen in his development?* No!! While information about Chen’s disability may be helpful in some ways, it doesn’t really affect our overall approach of focusing on Chen’s particular strengths and interests.

This principle became overwhelmingly apparent to us when Gabrielle began in our class. Gabrielle came with very limited functional language. During her first two weeks in our class, we were busy developing a picture communication system for her. Before we could get it adequately implemented, however, Gabrielle began using single words to indicate choices during planning time. We recognized that the daily routine was stimulating her language. Gabrielle will be attending kindergarten this fall. By using the daily routine to focus on her strengths and interests, as we do with all children, we got better results than we would have had with a program that focused narrowly on her weaknesses.

Educational Practices That Do No Harm

Current research on developmentally appropriate practices and how children learn suggest that the same precept that guides the medical profession should be applied just as uncompromisingly to our educational practices: *first, do no harm*.

This warning appeared in a newsletter from the Utah State Office of Education: “Validated research states that irreparable damage can be done to young children’s disposition to learn when inappropriate educational practices are introduced at a too early age. Young children learn differently than older children do. Therefore, the education of young children must be in keeping with their unique modes of learning” (Scherbinske, 2000, February, p. 29).

If we want to achieve this goal for all children, it’s important to take a close look at the current practices we use with young children with disabilities. Are these practices compatible with the unique ways young children learn?

“Recent research has demonstrated that collaborative and classroom-based service delivery models may be more effective than a pull-out model in developing speech and language skills of young children with communication disorders” (Paul-Brown, 1999, July/August, p. 54). □

When we use coercion and manipulation for the sake of reaching IEP goals and when we rely on direct teaching and drills, we fail to utilize active learning. These “push-down” or “pull-up” approaches can frustrate rather than contribute to children’s competence and self-esteem.

So what *should* we be doing as special educators? Is there a way we can meet state and local requirements without endangering the education of our little ones?

The answer lies in the core principles of the High/Scope approach. By using the **daily routine** and the **ingredients of active learning** (choice, materials, manipulation, child language, and adult support) and by focusing on children’s **strengths** and **interests**, we can facilitate the child’s growth regardless of his or her developmental level.

Keeping the High/Scope Routine Intact

Maintaining the integrity of the High/Scope daily routine is often a challenge for special educators who are also trying to meet IEP requirements for each child. In an attempt to accommodate related services and IEP goals and objectives, teachers often change daily events so much that the basic features of the High/Scope routine are no longer recognizable. Some teachers have gone so far as to take away choice and initiative at work time. This is a great tragedy.

However, it is possible for special educators to use the daily routine to support children with disabilities without compromising its integrity or ignoring the requirements of children’s IEPs. We can start to explain this by breaking down the parts of the High/Scope routine and clarifying some common misconceptions.

✓ Large-group activities.

Large-group time “involves the entire group of children and all the members of the adult teaching team. Everyone partic-

ipates, usually for about 10 minutes” (Hohmann & Weikart, 1995, p. 267).

Typically, special education preschools use large-group time as a time for whole-group instruction with direct teaching. Instead, large-group time should be *active* rather than passive. Children should be making choices, manipulating materials or ideas, and talking with peers and adults.

Greeting time, for example, is one of the large-group activities common in High/Scope programs. At this time, adults and children gather informally to start the day together. To help children make a smooth transition from home to school, greeting time occurs in a relaxed and comfortable setting. Rather than sit in a tight circle of chairs for a teacher-directed activity, children choose where and how they want to sit. In our classroom we have a small couch, beanbag chairs, and a rocking chair available for this time.

This is a time for sharing important information rather than for teaching lessons. “Reading” and discussing messages on a message board are key activities, as opposed to the rote counting and calendar time that occur in some programs. To enable all children to participate at their own levels, messages are kept brief (two or three at a time) and told in simple pictures. Words sometimes appear next to the pictures. One message we have every day is represented by the same picture, a door with a child’s symbol next to it. This indicates who will be the door opener that day. Children are eager to guess, “read,” and discuss the messages, and this provides language and literacy experiences for children of varied developmental levels.

✓ Small-group times.

“Small-group time in a High/Scope program provides children with opportunities to use materials, experiment with these materials, talk about their discoveries, and solve problems they encounter” (Hohmann & Weikart, p. 246).

Rather than having skill-based or rotating groups, High/Scope teachers plan small groups so that the same diverse group of children meets with the same adult every day together for several months. At small-group time, adults initiate activities based on children’s interests and development, including both key

experiences and IEP goals and making sure that the elements of active learning are in place.

Many kinds of small-group activities can promote both key experiences and individual IEP objectives. For example, blowing bubbles with wands, straws, or paper cups encourages key experiences in language and literacy, movement, and space while also promoting IEP objectives related to oral motor skills or bilabial consonants (“pop,” “bubbles”). Making “pictures” with materials such as straws, pipe cleaners, or strips of paper is another such broad-based activity. Children can snip or bend the materials to any length or form, and while they are practicing scissor skills, they are also enjoying key experiences in creative representation and space.

Snack time, another small-group activity, is often a time when special educators use manipulation and coercion in an attempt to elicit a “More cookie, please” response from each child. However, when snack time is based on High/Scope principles, it is seen as a social opportunity in which conversation occurs naturally. Our experience is that when demands are dropped, language occurs spontaneously with more frequency and complexity.

✓ **The plan-do-review process.**

There are many developmentally appropriate programs and we have tried quite a few of them, but the plan-do-review process is what sets High/Scope apart.

At **planning time** each child communicates at his or her own level to indicate a choice of activity for work time. Actually giving children choices, instead of insisting that they “choose” IEP-related activities, demonstrates our respect for children and gives them self-confidence.

Children with disabilities sometimes take longer than others to understand the planning process. They may express a plan and then abandon it. For example, they may point to or say “Blocks” for their plan and then head for the paints. In another common scenario, a child uses the same word or gesture every day at planning time, but it has no relationship to his or her actions. We recognize that this means the child understands the routine

but not yet *how* to plan.

This kind of misunderstanding is often a big concern for teachers. Yet when we take into consideration the child’s developmental level, this kind of occurrence is not unusual. We can best respond to such “plans” not by correcting children but by acknowledging children’s actual activity choices as their plans. By doing so, we are accepting the children’s efforts and helping them extend their ability to plan. In these instances we would comment on the child’s plan, saying something like “You



Small-group experiences easily adapt to children’s individual levels, since children are encouraged to experiment in their own way with the materials the teacher provides.

chose to paint.” If the child later goes to the blocks, we would then acknowledge that choice: “I see your plan is to play with the blocks.” Additionally, we might use classroom maps or photos of areas/objects as strategies for helping children plan. Making a “train” and dropping children off at the area they choose is another effective strategy.

During High/Scope **work times**, children carry out their plans. Adults support them through conversation, participation in the child’s play, and/or observation.

Some special education teachers set up the environment in a particular way, then insist that children experience a certain IEP-based activity before being allowed to continue with their plans. However, in our classroom we provide *opportunities*: we supply many materials to support IEP goals and objectives, and leave it up to the children to decide whether and how they will explore and experiment with them.

In our sand table we often have plastic bugs and tweezers, or we may fill the table with cooked spaghetti and offer children scissors to snip it into pieces. In

addition to strengthening their hand skills, these materials encourage children to carry out key experiences in creative representation and space. In our book area we have teacher-made books that integrate IEP objectives with language and literacy experiences that are of high interest to children. For example, the books may show pictures connected with IEP-related word sounds (such as pictures of moms with the word “mom” for practicing bilabial consonants) or photos of our children doing various classroom activities along with texts such as “Josh is running.” In our block area we have a toy mountain that children can drive cars over, under, around, and through. Rather than push children to engage in certain activities, we have found it much more useful to support IEP objectives by giving children choices during work time. It’s also important to provide enough time so children can extend and build upon their play. “Pulling out” children to work on IEP objectives interrupts the natural flow of play and learning. However, when opportunities are provided for social interaction, manipulation of materials, and large-motor movements, young children become better communicators and problem solvers while achieving their IEP objectives.

The same considerations that apply at planning time also apply at **recall time**, when children talk over their work-time experiences. Recalling can be especially difficult for children with disabilities. This reviewing doesn’t have to be limited to a specific time, however. We may choose to review with individual children during the transition to review time, at cleanup time, or even during work time, by asking them what they are doing or what they did or simply commenting on their activities. Recalling in this manner supports those children who are moving from the sensory-motor to the preoperational stage of development.

✓ **Transitions.** The times when children change from one activity to another should not be overlooked as additional opportunities to meet IEP objectives through active learning experiences. Children can hop to the sink to wash their hands or transition to outside time

while making the sounds and movements of their favorite animals. Transition times often lend themselves perfectly to IEP goals and objectives. One of our favorite High/Scope-style transitions is helpful for IEP objectives in motor planning, balance, and language. It goes like this: "It's awfully windy outside today. Let's move like the wind on the way to planning time. What will that look and sound like?"

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The examples given in this article illustrate how we use the High/Scope daily routine and active learning philosophy as tools for meeting the needs of all children in our classroom. We have realized that the need to meet special education goals and objectives should not change how we interact with children. For us, the key to special education is to take the "special" out. The heart's desire of every parent of a child with a disability is for the child to be treated just like everyone else. Using the daily routine and active learning as vehicles for focusing on children's strengths, interests, and needs, we can support the development of any child.

References

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2. Paul-Brown, D. (1999, July/August). Let's talk. *ASHA*, 74, 53-54.
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I am a preschool special education teacher who recently attended a High/Scope workshop, which explained how High/Scope's approach focuses on children's strengths and interests rather than their deficits. Aren't there some times when information on a child's disability is useful or important? How is this information used in High/Scope's strength-based approach?

Focusing on children's strengths and interests does not mean that we ignore or minimize any disabilities they may have. While having information about a child's disability can be helpful, we still assume that the child has the same need for active learning in the 10 key experience areas that all children have. High/Scope's approach emphasizes the need to look at each child's individual pattern of interests, needs, and strengths, and a child's "special needs" are a part of this individual pattern.

Information on a disability may be helpful in planning strategies that will enable a child to participate more fully in the classroom program. For example, knowing that a child with a specific cognitive disability may have more difficulty with short-term memory, the teacher might use lots of repetition with that child, a strategy



Children's play preferences tell us a lot about how to support them.

recommended in the article on page 3. In carrying this out, the teacher might want to see if the child enjoys stories, songs, or pretend play with many repeated elements. Keep in mind, though, that the goal of this strategy would not be to try to improve the child's memory but to enable him or her to take part in story-reading, group songs, pretending, and other learning experiences that are a regular part of the program. Obviously, knowing about a child's disability can be helpful as long as we avoid the pitfall of assuming that the child can't do something because of the disability. Observing what the child can do and learning about the play activities he or she prefers should always be our first resource in knowing how to support that child. □